TEXAS COCKTAIL CULTURE

Written By: *Carolyn Roark*

Texans have always been fond of a tipple. While the old West might be synonymous with beer and rotgut whiskey, our tastes have always included more complex elixirs, too. From the earliest frontier days, residents enjoyed mixed cocktails, especially in the sophisticated hotels and bars of cities like Houston, San Antonio, and Galveston. Spirits have been big business since before statehood: Judge Roy Bean was a saloon owner, and even Governor "Ma" Ferguson, a teetotaler, fought against Prohibition.

In the modern age, Texas has been better known for producing beer and wine than the hard stuff. Still, homegrown spirits (the legal kind, anyway) started to flourish here in the last 20 years.

Fortunately, we're making up for lost time with almost 50 distilleries now operating across the state. The field has grown so deep and diverse that Imbibe magazine dedicated a whole issue to Lone Star drinking...a volume that features every beverage but Lone Star. The folks driving the explosion of craft spirits show plenty of entrepreneurial spirit, but what really drives them is a love for a glass of really exceptional hooch.

Consider Tito's Vodka, the firstborn of Texas craft spirits, which celebrated its Sweet 16 birthday in 2013. Founder Tito Beveridge wasn't looking to start a trend when he founded the company; he just wanted to make a vodka that didn't taste like nail polish remover when sipped on its own. His little one-still/one-man business now generates $85 million a year in sales. Paula Angerstein followed right on his heels, founding Paula's Texas Spirits to distribute the limoncello-inspired orange liqueur she developed in her quest for the perfect margarita. Garrison Brothers lays claim to the state's oldest whiskey license, which they use to produce three varieties of bourbon; their Cowboy bourbon recently won the 2014 American Micro Whisky of the Year from the folks at the Whisky Bible. Balcones Distilling boasts a family of seven products that have won multiple international spirits competitions, including a single malt that has beaten the pants off of some of Scotland's most famous labels in London's Wizards of Whisky competition. Master Distiller Chip Tate regularly takes home gold and silver medals from the San Francisco Spirits Competition, too.

Today, folks like Angerstein, Beveridge, Garrison, and Tate, have become the elder statesmen (and women) of Texas craft distilling. Their persistence broke down the legal resistance to booze-based commerce that had lingered since the days of Prohibition. Their creativity and discriminating tastes set high standards for quality and inventiveness. Why settle for a jar of 'shine when you can sip on a snifter of Rumble, a concoction of wildflower honey, mission figs, and turbinado sugar? With the example of these pot still pioneers before, Texas's new crop of spirits makers have even grander ambitions.

Many of the state's newest and best distillers recently showed off their first fruits at Edible Austin's charity "Sippin' Social" event in June. In addition to checking in with some of the old hands like Tito and Paula, it was a rare opportunity to sample first hand the new direction of Texas spirits.

Treaty Oaks Distilling started with a platinum rum. Eager to take on all the "big boys" at once, they have expanded to include Starlite vodka, Waterloo gin, and Red Handed Bourbon. Their latest endeavor is a barrel-aged release of both rum and gin lines.

Banner Distilling, with the motto "grain and rain," demonstrates a commitment to sustainability and eco-culture. Their vodka includes purified rainwater and organic grains.

Manor-based South Congress Distilling sources its molasses from some of the state's oldest sugar plantations and ages its platinum rum in oak barrels.

Both Genius Liquids and Revolution Spirits opted for a bold start with gin products. A complex, herbal beverage that starts with juniper berries, there are as many formulations as there are distillers who make them. Gin is often considered less approachable or easy-drinking than simpler products like vodka or rum, thanks to its herbal, somewhat medicinal, flavor. As a key ingredient in many delightful pre-Prohibition and craft style cocktails, it is worth experimenting to find the one that best appeals to your tastes.

Three of the standout recipes from the event are below. Easy to shake and even easier to sip, each one provides an excellent means to familiarize yourself with the spirits of Texas.

AVIATION || *Traditional, pre-Prohibition cocktail with a strong citrus character (single serving)*

Photos By: Carolyn Roark

AVIATION

1 ½ oz. Gin (*Revolution, Genius, Or Waterloo are all great options*)
1 oz. Maraschino Liqueur
½ oz. Fresh Squeezed Lemon Juice (*reserve part of peel*)

Optional: *Add ¼ tsp. Crème De Violette, for a more floral aroma and delicate lavender tint.*

Mix the gin, maraschino, lemon juice, and optional crème de violette in a shaker. Add ice and shake for 30 seconds to chill. Serve in a small coupe glass. Flame the reserved peel and rub the rim of the glass, then use as garnish.

BLUEBERRY MOJITO

Courtesy of White Hat Distilling.
An easy and delicious cocktail, as invigorating as it is simple (single serving)

1 ½ oz. White Hat Rum
½ oz. Fresh Lime Juice
½ oz. Simple Syrup
Fresh Blueberries
4-5 Mint leaves
Club Soda

In a shaker, combine all ingredients except club soda. Muddle gently but thoroughly. Add ice and shake well for 10 seconds. Strain mixture into Collins glass over ice, top up with club soda. Garnish with mint sprig.

PISCO PUNCH || *Traditional, pre-Prohibition cocktail that is sweet, summery, and refreshing (single serving)*

Photos By: Carolyn Roark

PISCO PUNCH

2 oz. Pisco
1 oz. Pineapple Syrup*
1/2 oz. Fresh Lemon Juice

* Pineapple Syrup

1 c. Sugar
1 c. Water
1 c. Pineapple Juice

Mix the Pisco, pineapple syrup, and lemon juice in a shaker. Strain into a glass to remove pulp, and serve in a punch or Collins glass with crushed ice and lemon peel or pineapple garnish.

For larger groups, multiply ingredients by estimated number of servings. Pour into a pitcher and stir well, then strain into punch bowl over an ice block.

Place all ingredients in a pot, stir well with a whisk, and bring to a rolling boil. Remove pot from heat and allow to cool. Decant the liquid into a storage container and refrigerate for up to 2 weeks.